

English 125
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Dear CollegeACB, Why do you exist?

On January 14, 2010 a tragedy occurred in South Hadley, Massachusetts. After a horrific day at school, fifteen-year-old Irish immigrant, Phoebe Prince, took her own life after being harassed excessively by her classmates online and in person. Ever since she entered South Hadley High School, Prince's relationship with a senior football player had sparked the hatred of jealous classmates. Her suicide was "the culmination of a nearly three-month campaign of verbally assaultive behavior and threats of physical harm," according to Northwestern District Attorney Elizabeth Scheibel (Goldman 2010). Stories such as Phoebe Prince's destroy communities and leave haunting marks for years. The online world has connected people in a multitude of ways through different online forums and social networks, but when cyber-bullying occurs on these sites, connections and communities deteriorate. Examples of cyber-bullying have not only spread through high schools but also throughout colleges. One site, in particular, has the potential to spark a plethora of cyber-bullying—CollegeACB. With the site only benefitting anonymous users, while humiliating those targeted, the reason for the site's existence must be called into question.

When the site was first launched it sounded all too positive and uplifting, according to the sites press release:

“From sexuality to politics, from keg parties to concerns about course selections, the ACB is a website that helps build community and engenders the open exchange of information...It is the campus center, the dorm room, the cafeteria, and the lecture hall, all combined into a single, easily accessible forum where everyone is invited to converse openly, without fear of reprisal or reprimand,” (Devane 2010).

Although there were good intentions behind the creation of the online forum, it slowly spiraled into a gossip, tabloid-esque site. Headers such as “ATTENTION STONERS” (7) or

“Did you hear?! Obama got shot!” (Did you hear?! 72) predominate on the site, rather than the promised community-building discussions about aspects of campus life. The types of posts that have grown to truly epitomize the site are the ones containing rash and nasty comments. Typical posts such as “If every sorority were a person from your high school...” (3) or “SDT is the worst sorority!” (73) reek of derogatory statements that rip people and groups to shreds. The site is a way “to promote a student controlled space where people can say whatever they want without fear of social backlash,” says ACB’s head coordinator, Peter Frank (O’Brien). This “fear of social backlash” is eliminated as the result of the anonymity of CollegeACB. So, with this ability to post anything freely, the amount of lies and stupidity that build up on this site is immense. The real reason, however, for users to post on ACB is driven by the addictive phenomenon of self-empowerment.

There is clearly a huge sense of empowerment when writing online because whatever is typed or recorded can be broadcast to just about anyone with a computer or Internet access through another device. With the build-up of nonsense, self-empowerment can prove why someone would write these kinds of posts on a site like College ACB. According to the article “Internet Empowerment”, “empowerment through the Internet refers to how the net, as an enabling technology, allows people to do things that they found difficult to do or were unable to achieve before”, like reaching an enormous audience with just a click of a mouse (Amichai-Hamburger). It could be that with this sense of empowerment people use the Internet to make themselves feel better. People like to feel powerful and superior especially when they are insecure and alone, and what better place to feel powerful than the Internet? With thousands of people reading every word posted it’s hard for anyone writing on the Internet not to feel a sense of superiority. One article titled “E-empowerment: Empowerment by the Internet” describes how

when one tries to change his/her identity through this self e-empowerment he/she tends to be making “major changes to one’s social environment, such as moving to a distant city, changing jobs or schools, and going away to college” (Amichai-Hamburger, McKenna, and Tal). With all the changes experienced while in college, students cannot help but feel obligated to try and change their identities. They want to feel powerful and in control of something while everything else around them is changing so quickly, and CollegeACB is a perfect outlet for this urge.

Driven by the sense of self-empowerment that arises from using online communities such as CollegeACB, cyber-bullies have become rampant. Not too long after the horrible loss of Phoebe Prince, another youth took his life as a result of online humiliation. At Rutgers University an out-of-the-closet student, Tyler Clementi, committed suicide “after his room-mate, Dharun Ravi, reportedly felt compelled to tweet his thoughts about Clementi's sexuality,” and then video taped Clementi and another male taking part in sexual activities (Freeman 2010). Clementi and Prince’s stories have shocked America and have shown just how serious a problem cyber-bullying is, and sites such as CollegeACB only encourage this type of behavior. According to Hadley Freeman’s article, “humans in general and teenagers in particular have always found ways to humiliate one another,” possibly as a way for the bully to feel superior (Freeman 2010). Online outlets such as CollegeACB have become a way for those who want to self-empower to humiliate others, thus taking part in cyber-bullying. Those being targeted on this site do not deserve harsh comments from anonymous users. Whether or not the information posted is true, the online self-empowerment seekers should not be allowed to continue such practices.

Malicious posts have torn apart many individuals at the University of Michigan, especially through targeting specific females’ personalities, looks, and sexual activities. Several girls in particular, who will not be named, have several threads filled with horrific comments for

all users to view. Some of them include: “we think she’s an annoying person in general. We think she’s a sh**ty person because she’s a wh**e and humiliates other girls then calls them Jappy... pot calling the kettle black” and “I wouldn't care if she's stupid OR ugly either. But the combination of the two makes her an ideal target to s**t on” (S.B. 1). The posts do not have to be remotely true in order to utterly humiliate the discussed targets. What is even more surprising is that the above comments were from a thread telling people to stop bashing this specific girl. Even with these anti-bash threads, other users still continue to post the same snarky and derogatory remarks in response. Although all posts can be removed at anytime, these posts still exist because the site is not as monitored as it should be. If Michigan’s CollegeACB continues to look like this, it will not be long until one of these girls cracks. It only takes an accumulation of mean comments online, regardless of whether they are true or not, to create deep emotional wounds.

While the victims of University of Michigan and other online bullying suffer from this eruption of anonymous e-empowerment, other viewers must contend with the complete lack of credibility and worthlessness of the site. Although spreading any kind of gossip, or even self-promoting hype, through CollegeACB has become extremely easy to do, if the people posting on this site think that they are going to influence the views of thousands of readers, they are seriously mistaken. When freshman, and current Greek Life member, Abbie Cook was asked if the site affected her view of her sorority and other organizations and people she replied “no not really. You have to take everything on there with a grain of salt because every single frat/sorority has something bad said about them. I just laugh at the posts I read because you can’t take anything on there seriously,” and she is not the only one who believes this. In a survey I conducted regarding the site involving 50 student participants, 41 out of the 50 said that the site

was absolutely pointless and the other 9 claimed the site only had a minor influence on people and really only on those written about. One female respondent stated “the posts are so out there, and there are so many contradicting posts that there is little to no validity.” It’s clear that many students viewing the Michigan CollegeACB do not take it to heart, and the goal of “community building” is merely a thing of the past. The targeted feel humiliated, and any other reader is dissuaded from the build up of nonsense. Why this site even runs seems preposterous.

Preposterous or not, communities based on e-empowerment and lies figure prominently in our society and pop culture. As just one example, in the hit movie *Mean Girls*, which portrays queen bees and wanna-bees at a “typical” suburban American high school, the school’s most popular clique of girls creates a “Burn Book” in which they write mean, and untrue, comments about other girls at the school. According to the film’s heartthrob, Aaron Samuels, the girls wrote the book because they were just “bored with their own lame lives,” trying to feel better about themselves by putting down everybody else. In many respects College ACB is just a collegiate version of this form of malicious, and unsubstantiated, gossip. When the main character Cady becomes threatened and upset by her Calculus Teacher, Ms. Thornberry, she creates a twisted lie about Ms. Thornberry and puts it in the Book. When the pages of the Book are released to the rest of the student body, so is this disgusting lie. When lies are posted on CollegeACB, it is very much like the pages of the Burn Book being copied and distributed to everyone who is bashed. Once everyone bears witness to the contents of the Book, the school’s staff are forced to re-build the high school’s community. With the Burn Book and CollegeACB having so many connections, there must be a similar loss of community involving ACB. The site’s creators set out to bring the college campus together, but it could be that ACB is tearing the community apart.

ACB users, who try so desperately to be on top in the online world, selfishly, but unknowingly, break down a community. Based on the evidence from the conducted survey and other interviews with students, it is clear that this site is potentially just a pathetic forum in which bored students can rant and dish about others and themselves to make themselves feel better. This form of self-empowerment, however, can easily degenerate into cyber-bullying. A site cannot keep running when there is a risk of someone getting seriously hurt. What drives the need to abolish this online space even more is how this effort at self-empowerment ultimately fails. Current Greek Life member, Jessie Kreamer says: “the issue with CollegeACB is it’s essentially just a way for people who care entirely too much about what other people think of them and how they and their friends are perceived by the school.” With no one buying into the e-empowerment scam, one must wonder why CollegeACB even exists. With a much needed college community potentially falling apart, it is about time that ACB users and Peter Frank said goodbye to the terminally ill “confession board.”

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